

EARTHQUAKE WEATHER



BY
Neith Boyce

THE breakfast table was laid under a live-oak tree at the side of the house; for already, at half past eight in the morning, it was stiflingly hot inside the small frame cottage. It was not much cooler outside. The haze of September, after a rainless summer, hung over the dry plain and the brown foothills. On this morning it was thicker than usual, and more still. There was no motion in the air. The sky looked burned; the towering mountains on the horizon were murky with the smoke of forest fires. The earth was like ashes and cinders, refuse of the devouring sun.

At the table under the oak tree a woman sat making coffee. She was young and graceful, and her white dress and hat and pale-green sash had an air of the world. She was a little too pale and thin now, and her eyes were tired. But those eyes were charming, nevertheless, and her face was full of spirit and energy. When the coffee was made, she sat waiting, looking out vaguely across the plain, yellow with dried grasses, crossed here and there by dry watercourses or by roads that seemed to lead nowhere.

She had made the table as attractive as possible; it had white linen, bright, old silver, a bowl of pink roses from the vine that grew over the cottage.

A Chinese servant in loose white garments and flapping shoes brought out a dish under a silver cover. The young woman motioned him back impatiently.

"Not ready yet. Keep it hot," she said.

But at this moment her husband appeared at the door of the cottage and came slowly and languidly to take his seat opposite her. The silver-covered dish was placed before him, after he had refused the fruit that the Chinaman awkwardly offered him. Except a polite "Good morning," no words were uttered by the man or the woman for some ten minutes; during which he made an uninterested inspection of the table, declined eggs, and finally, with a resigned air, took a piece of toast.

"I'm afraid it's burned, as usual," said his wife, with a slight frown. "Wong is really too bad."

"Oh——" he murmured vaguely.

He was slender, good looking, immaculately dressed, with an air of delicate freshness from the bath, an air of extreme physical fastidiousness. He looked, too, rather like an invalid. He was pale, his eyes were heavy, and his face, keen and clear in outline, seemed now like an empty shell, drained of life and vigor.

"You didn't sleep well?" said the young woman, carefully pouring the coffee.

"No."

He made an impatient, irritable gesture, brushing away the flies that swarmed about his plate.

"Why do you try to set meals out here, Edith?" he asked wearily. "How can one eat, with these beasts all over one?"

"It was so hot indoors. I thought we might be able to breathe here," she said, with an air of patience.

"Hot! It's stifling! We must get away from here to-day. I never knew such infernal weather. We'll go up into the mountains."

He glanced up at the veil of smoke that dulled their bossy surfaces, showing here and there a glint of fire.

"It's much worse to-day," said Edith. "The whole range seems afire."

"Then we'll go farther away—or to the sea. Why on earth do you want to stay here, Edith?"

She looked at him and spoke with forced calmness.

"Do you think I want to stay here? You know I only want what you want—or what's best for you. You haven't wanted to go away."

"No—so long as I could sleep! At least it's quiet here. But— Oh, Lord!"

He lurched forward, his elbows on the table, and hid his face with his hands.

The woman's eyes filled with tears and she looked despair.

"Poor Jack!" she said, in a tragic voice. "What was it that kept you awake, do you know?"

"Oh, I don't know! The heat—The air seems so dead. Then the ride yesterday only tired me for nothing. My cursed brain keeps on working like a mill with nothing to grind. I shall go crazy if this keeps up."

"Jack! Don't say that sort of thing again. You might have a little mercy on me!"

He uncovered his haggard eyes and looked at her.

"Oh, you've thought of it, too! Perhaps I am, by Jove! A good thing for you—you could get rid of me, then."

She made no reply for the moment, but sat looking down at her plate and moving the pieces of silver about with unsteady fingers. The compression of her full lips showed a fierce effort at self-control. At last she said quietly:

"We needn't quarrel, need we? You know what my life is—that I haven't anything but you—your welfare—"

The words sounded to her own ear cold and forced. Deep in her heart swelled a passion of pity and of tenderness for him, but over it lay a crust of hardness.

"And you blame me for that—of course!" he retorted quickly. "I'm to blame for dragging you off out here, away from everything you care for. Yes, I know! And that's just the hardest part of it all for me. And you know how it grinds me, and yet you keep rubbing it in! I wish to Heaven I hadn't let you come with me! I could have stood it much better alone!"

Edith was silent, and looked at her husband's bowed head with an air of not seeing him. She was trying to suppress the fierce impulse to cut back at him. She was saying to herself mechanically: "It's nerves—temper—the heat."

And there was a bitter flavor of contempt in her thought, in her silence. She could not help a little despising "nerves." This weakness seemed to her childish, foolish, unworthy of a reasoning being, unworthy a man, who ought to be master of himself; above all, unworthy of Jack Challoner, the man she had loved and married.

She had loved him partly for his strength, his intellectual grasp, his energy and success among men; at least, it was this that had struck her imagination. All her devotion to him had risen

up to meet the blow of his nervous breakdown, for which, indeed, she had felt that her own ambition for him was partly responsible, though not more than his own. With no thought of complaint, no word of regret, she had given up—for a time indefinite—the life she enjoyed so keenly; and she had given all her strength, her buoyancy, to make their new life endurable, to sustain Jack in his boredom, his fits of despair.

For a time complete rest and open-air activity had seemed to answer her hopes for him; they had begun to plan for going home. Then, lately, with this onset of sulphurous weather, his sleeplessness had returned and he had gone to pieces again. And his irritability, which he seemed now perfectly unable to control, constantly stirred Edith's quick temper. She tried to control her speech and usually succeeded, but the effort left her cold to him.

There were depths in her below this surface play. Secretly, she mourned over him, she pitied him passionately, she feared for him, for their life and happiness together. Sometimes, under this strain, thrown absolutely upon one another as they were, the basis of their relation seemed to be giving way. If they could no longer love one another, as they had done for five years of married life, what would become of them? They had no child; they were appallingly free to separate. Of late they had quarreled more and more; and under the repetition of such speeches as this last one of Jack's, Edith had begun to feel that it might come to separation.

And now as she looked at him, silent, and looked over his bent head at the plain swimming in a dull haze, all the universe seemed to her like this outlook—ashes and cinders, burned refuse of the devouring sun. Love was like that sun, she thought. It could burn and scorch all the life out of one's world and leave it—the world that had

been so glorious, so full of the vigor and joy of quick-moving life!—leave it like this.

Jack lit a cigarette with shaking fingers, and turned in his chair away from the table.

"I shall go away to-day, somewhere," he said.

"And shall I stay here?" asked Edith.

"Just as you like. You can come with me, if you wish. I don't doubt, though, that you'll be glad enough to be off by yourself for a while."

He smoked nervously and flicked the ash off his cigarette with trembling fingers. His tone was brusque and cold. And all the time the look of his thin, averted cheek, his flickering eyelid, the sad and bitter curve of his mouth, said to her—and she well understood: "Say that you want to go with me! Say you don't mind it! Say that I'm not dragging the life out of you! Say that you love me!"

And she would not, or could not, answer the deeper speech. Something in her felt with pain and tenderness that appeal; she could almost have taken him in her arms and wept over him as if he had been a sick child, as often he seemed to her. But—after all, he was not a child, and childishness in him deeply irritated her. It was so unutterably foolish, this bickering! And a demon of perverseness made her say coolly:

"Very well—if you really don't need me."

"Need you? No, I don't," he retorted instantly. "I'm sure we shall be better apart for a while. Then at least I shan't have to feel that I'm murdering you by inches!"

"It isn't fair to say that!" she cried, and tears sprang to her eyes. "You have no right to say it! I haven't complained. I——"

"Well, your look complains—everything about you! Don't you think I can see? Can't I see that you're long-

ing every moment to go back to the East—that you want your friends, your amusements, your admirers? Can't I see what letters mean to you? You have a letter from Jim Graves or Telson and you live on it for days! I don't blame you at all. It's perfectly natural. There's no reason why you should be anything but bored, stuck out here with me. Only what I say is that it doesn't help *me*. On the contrary, it worries me to death, feeling your unhappiness, and—"

"It isn't true that I haven't helped you! I know I have, and you know it, too! You wouldn't have said this sort of thing till just lately. I suppose the weather has got on your nerves!"

"It's you that get on my nerves!" he retorted, with petulance and anger.

"Well, then, you'd better go away alone," she said.

"Very well, I will. But there's no reason why you should stay here. I think you'd better go home. You can go to the country there somewhere for the present, where you know people and it will be amusing for you."

"Amusing! I feel like being amused!"

"Well, you will, you know, when you get there. And I shall be more comfortable if you are. You weren't made, you know, to stand much of a strain."

"I don't know about that," said Edith, in a low voice. "I rather think I have stood some strain."

"Oh, I know you're a martyr! But you needn't be one a day longer. You can go whenever you like."

"You needn't say that to me again, Jack Challoner! I *will* go—and I shall not come back."

"Very well—as you like," he said, and he tried to light another cigarette, but his hands trembled so that he could not hold the match.

Edith looked at him, her eyes blazing, but he did not meet her look.

At this moment Jerome, the cowboy,

lounged up from the direction of the barn and took off his hat with a slow:

"Good morning! Reckon you don't want to ride this morning, do you?"

"Yes," said Challoner hurriedly, getting up from his chair. "You can saddle my horse. I'll be ready in ten minutes."

"Well—just as *you* say," drawled Jerome. "It's pretty hot—not that the *heat's* goin' to hurt you any—but it's darned queer weather!"

Challoner walked away toward the house, his head bent.

The cowboy looked up speculatively at the hazy mountains and put the back of one sunburned hand to his cheek, which was streaked with sweat.

"Wish it would rain and put out them fires," he said. "This weather don't please *me*. Well, I'll saddle up, then. Your horse, too, ma'am?"

"No, not mine, thank you," said Edith vaguely.

She always liked to look at Jerome. The swing of his beautiful body in its careless and easy dress, the slightly rakish angle at which the hat sat on his black hair, his grave face, burned to an Indian tint, his piercing whistle as he went about his work, his youth, his physical tone, all pleased her. Even at this moment she looked at him and said something to keep him there a moment longer.

"Do you think this weather will last long?" she asked.

"Shouldn't think so, ma'am. Reckon we'll have a storm, or something. It ain't *all* them forest fires. You can see it yourself. The air feels queer. I never seen this sort o' weather here before."

"No—I don't think we can stand it here if it's like this," said Edith absently.

"Oh, it ain't goin' to last, ma'am. It ain't natural, this dead kind of air. Why, heat, you know, *heat* ain't goin' to

hurt you none. You can go out in this sun any time you want and get into a good sweat, and it's *good* for you. But not like this. It wilts you right out, this kind of air. Better not go out."

He nodded gravely and went back to the barn. And Edith watched him go and said to herself: "I wonder what will happen to take the life out of him—to eat up his youth and dull his look and make him—like the rest of us!"

The Chinaman came out to take away the dishes, and Edith rose and walked slowly toward the house. She paused for some moments before it, in the shade of the oak tree. The house was so small—hardly big enough for two people who had—quarreled. From where she stood she could hear Jack moving about in his bedroom—the slam of a drawer, a smothered exclamation, the sound of a shoe flung across the room. She went in, finally, into the sitting room, and sat down on a couch. When Jack had done dressing and had gone out for his ride, she would begin. Her trunks were in a small room off the kitchen; Jerome could get them out for her.

She looked about the small, stuffy room to see what things she must pack. The books—no, she would leave all those, and the little silver and porcelain vases and dishes that were scattered about to hold flowers or fruit or cigarette ashes. Then it occurred to her that it would bother Jack to pack these things, and she decided to take them. The Navaho blankets that covered the uneven floor and the couch—those she must pack, too, and the Indian jars and baskets that she had amused herself by collecting. The corners of the room were full of these; and she had had shelves put up round the walls, just under the ceiling, to hold the pottery—jugs and bowls, large and small, buff, red, brown, and black, like the burned, bare earth. She glanced up at these and reflected that she had no

boxes to pack them in. There were inconveniences in being ordered off at a moment's notice!

A suffocating weight seemed to press on her breast, almost to choke her breathing; yet she felt quite cool and calm. This was how it was, then, when the crash had really come! One felt perfectly dead and unconcerned. She heard every quick, nervous movement that Jack made behind his closed door. She thought: "He can't find his belt, or something. Shall I go in and find it for him?" But she sat still and looked at the floor and waited, in a dull sort of dream.

This was what it was like, then! This was what it would be like, all the rest of one's life. A dry earth, a sky of brass, a perpetual choking pain in one's breast—Yes, this it would be to see love go out of one's life, and to live on without it. Edith was but thirty. She felt infinitely old, and yet she saw that there would be infinite years to live through, alone. She knew well for how little, in comparison, those other things of her life would count—the things that Jack had reproached her with. She might still have those things. But—it was true, as she had said to him, that *he* had been her life. And now it was all ending in ashes and failure—the bitterness of death.

How cruel to say that she had not helped him, that she had hurt him, that he would be better off without her! And all this because she could not at all times seem happy! It was this, she knew—he could not bear to see her depressed and sad. It hurt his pride that she should be unhappy with *him*! And also he did deeply desire her happiness, she knew. But how could she seem happy and at ease, with the strain of his illness, his moodiness, his perpetual outbreaks of temper? And for this he was ready to break up their life together! Bitterness flooded her heart, scalding tears came to her eyes. This

it was to have failed, to see the promise of one's youth die away, unfulfilled.

In the dead heat of the day she felt suddenly faint. A dizziness came upon her, and, as she got to her feet, rather frightened, it seemed that the solid earth rocked and trembled under her. She staggered and fell against the wall, which seemed to lean unaccountably away from her. She heard something fall in the next room. At the same moment a horse rushed by the window at full speed, and Jerome's voice rose in an expostulatory shout. The kitchen door slammed; Wong, the Chinaman, ran out into the yard. Jack was tugging at the door of his room, which was hard to open. Again came that shuddering vibration. This time the whole house trembled and creaked; a jar fell from the shelf and crashed on the floor. Edith ran to the door of the bedroom, which opened inward, and threw her weight against it. It swung open, and she fell into Jack's arms and clung to him.

"What is it?" she gasped. "An earthquake?"

"Of course. Come along out of this," said Jack calmly, pushing her out before him.

She clung to his arm in apparent terror. She was, in fact, frightened, but not nearly so much so as she seemed, for it suited her to cling to him. Before they could cross the room and get out of the house, the floor tilted up with a wrenching sound, and there was a wild rain and crash of pottery as the whole contents of the shelves came down. Edith tried frantically to push Jack out of the door first, and so blocked the way for a moment. And as he used his superior strength and lifted her bodily out of the room, a great earthen bowl struck him on the head and shoulders, and he fell among its fragments.

Jerome carried him out of the house, as part of one wall and a corner of the

roof fell in, and laid him on the ground under a tree at a safe distance from the buildings. There was no other place to take him. The barn was rickety, and the tank house, where Jerome slept, seemed about to fall, the tank and the windmill toppling over to one side.

Jerome dashed off for some water. He was long in finding it; the olla suspended from a branch of the oak had swung and broken against the tree trunk, and he had to break in the kitchen door, which had jammed shut. Till he came back, Edith crouched on the ground beside Jack, rubbing his wrists and temples and gasping for breath. The sky was densely clouded now, the air blind with smoke and haze. She saw Jerome at last, running back with a bucket in each hand. There came a long roll of the earth, more terrifying than any sea in storm. The tank and the fans of the windmill lurched and fell, breaking down a tree that stood by the tank house. Edith felt her head whirling; she hid her face on Jack's breast. She thought dimly that they would die together, that perhaps he was already dead. Then she felt the faint beating of his heart.

"Oh, save him!" she cried. "Where is he hurt? Did it strike his head?"

Jerome knelt by the unconscious man and calmly poured a bucketful of water over his face. Edith helped to lift him up and supported his head on her shoulder.

"Jack, Jack!" she cried, and kissed him frantically, his wet cheek and forehead and hair. "Oh, do you think he is much hurt? Can you go for a doctor?"

"Yes'm, I can," Jerome said, "if you want me to leave. But where can we put him? I think it's goin' to rain—or somethin'."

"Oh, leave him here. I don't dare take him in anywhere. I couldn't get him out by myself. If it rains, I'll hold an umbrella over him. Only hurry, hurry!"

"Yes'm. But if it *rains*, you know, an umbrella won't do no good. We could put him in the tank house. There ain't no weight on it now, you see, and it'll sure stand, all right. I think he's comin' to."

Jack stirred and opened his eyes.

"*Jack, dearest!*" cried Edith, in a choked voice. "You aren't badly hurt, are you?"

He tried to sit up, but fell back weakly, with a groan.

"No, it's my shoulder," he gasped.

"Collar bone broken," announced Jerome, after a rapid investigation. "Now, I tell you, ma'am, we'll just put him in the wagon and take him straight off to the doctor. It's no good stayin' *here*."

With a glance at the sky, Jerome leaped up and ran to the barn, where a sound of furious kicking announced the disturbance of the tethered horses. He rolled out the light wagon, filled the body with hay, brought out a nervous horse, and harnessed up, all with a rapid fire of oaths and expostulations. He shouted and waved to a white figure that fluttered about like a decapitated hen among the orange trees. But Wong, the Chinaman, declined to understand that something was wanted from the house, and Jerome, muttering curses, hitched the horse to a tree and ran, himself, to get the pillows.

Meantime, Edith, sitting on the ground and holding Jack in her arms, implored him, between kisses, to say that he was not much hurt.

"No—what's a collar bone? I'm not hurt at all," he said quite calmly. "Got a nasty bruise, that's all."

"Yes, you are hurt! You are, you poor darling, and it's my fault! And you might have been killed!"

"How your fault? Did you cause the earthquake?" inquired Jack, with a wan smile.

"Oh, you know if it hadn't been for me, you would have got out all right!"

Oh, Jack, will you forgive me for being such a nuisance to you?"

She choked and sobbed, and the tears ran down her cheeks.

"Why, look here, you silly girl, didn't you help me out? That door was jammed against the floor somehow, and I might not have got it open without you!"

"No—no! There was the window! But it's nice of you to say it!"

"What are you crying for, you idiot?" he murmured, and he kissed her.

"I know I *have* been—" she sobbed.

"What? An idiot?"

"Yes—a nuisance, I meant. I have been horrid lately, and I don't blame you for wanting to get rid of me."

"Dearest," said Jack gravely, "you know whether I want to get rid of you. Not as long as you want to stay with a cross-grained brute like me—"

A kiss interrupted him. He smiled; the black lashes drooped over his eyes; he looked oddly, pathetically content, like a child comforted after some hurt.

Edith's arms tightened about him and gave him a twinge of pain; but he let no sign of it appear.

"I love you," she said passionately. "And I will never go away unless you actually throw me out!"

Jack laughed caressingly. His face now looked as she loved to see it—softened, brightened, touched by a sudden magic color of youth and joy.

She wept softly. And all the while she was vaguely troubled by the sight of Jerome's haste as he made his preparations for flight. Was it that Jack was really more hurt than she thought? She was terrified as this occurred to her, and he saw the sudden fright in her face.

"What is it, dearest?" he asked.

"You—— I'm afraid you're really hurt, Jack."

"Nonsense! I'll get up and prove to you I'm not."

And, in spite of her protestations, he did get up and walked to the wagon. He was put down on the straw and pillows, and Edith got in and sat beside him. She went just as she was, in her crumpled white dress and hat, without a glance into the wrecked house. Jerome locked the front door and jerked the back door into place. Then he leaped into his seat, and they started. Jerome's broncho was tied by a lariat to the back of the wagon.

"I'll go and find Mr. Challoner's horse afterward," he explained. "The critter bolted when the quake came."

A white figure, wringing its hands and moaning, fluttered after them for a little way. But Jerome, turning, shook his fist at Wong, the Chinaman, and declined to stop for him.

"I hate chinks!" he said. "They've got about as much spunk as a rat—no, not as much. And, besides, we ain't got no time to lose."

He whipped the nervous horse into its fastest trot. And before long Edith saw the reason for his haste. There came a sudden coolness in the air, and it rained. The water came down in blinding, torrential sheets. They put a rug over Jack, and Edith huddled beside him, drenched to the skin, splashed with mud; and they made for the doctor's house along roads whose inches of dust had become thick mire. The mountains were blotted out; the plain showed in vague, silvery glimpses through the flooding rain. In the midst of this fierce outburst the sky seemed already lighter, and a breath of freshness stirred over the thirsty land.

Some days later, they drove back to the cottage from their temporary shelter to see what could be saved from the wreck. Wong, the Chinaman, was living precariously in the kitchen, and nothing had been touched in the house.

It had been raining steadily from the day of their departure until to-day. The broken roof had sagged in at the middle; the sitting room was a mass of ruin. Edith turned away after one look, but Jack went in and picked up the small silver dishes, tarnished and full of wilted flowers; there was nothing else to take. They made merry over the total amount of salvage—some clothes and linen, stained with rain, and the silver. Books, upholstery, and crockery were hopelessly gone.

"It was a pretty complete smash, wasn't it?" said Jack, as they stood outside, while the trunks were being put into the wagon, and contemplated their former abode.

In spite of his lamed shoulder, he was looking much more vigorous than for some time past. He breathed in the air with evident pleasure; it was crisp and cool and full of perfume from the pink roses that covered the caving wall of the house. The ruin looked almost cheerful under its cloak of fresh green and blossoms.

"It was," answered Edith. "But—a lucky one, perhaps?"

Her eyes sparkled, too, as she smiled at him. She smiled—but she shivered a little, too, and turned away from the sight of the house.

"It was rather dangerous," she said.

Jack put his arm about her. They stood looking off across the plain, already miraculously touched with freshness, with a light breath of green. The sky was a deep, cloudless blue, the mountains violet and purple, and the farther range had a touch of snow on its high crests. Their eyes were grave as they looked. Danger had passed them by, but it had left its mark. Their earth, perhaps, seemed more fragile, the crust that covered its terrible forces of unrest thinner, than of old. They clung to one another, and looked out on the reviving beauty of that earth with graver eyes.